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ABSTRACT

This report draws details and examples from a study of the general manager job in a major corporation in an effort to determine what it takes to be an effective general manager. The report looks at two aspects of the demanding and important position of general manager. First, the report discusses the more or less constant requirements of the job, those demands that the general manager job places on any manager in most situations. The demands discussed include the need to function strategically and tactically, to think multi-dimensionally, to build and make use of large networks of contacts, to manage organizations of large scope and scale, and to occupy an elevated position with its visibility and trappings. Next, the report examines the variation in general manager jobs, with special emphasis on the contextual factors that make one general manager job different from another. Specific examples from the organization studied are given to illustrate these contextual factors. A section on how a general manager can evolve through various stages of definition and redefinition is also supported by examples from the company studied. The report concludes with five guidelines for studying and understanding the general manager job. (NB)

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Robert E. Kaplan

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The Warp and Woof of the General Manager's Job

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The Warp and Woof of the General Manager's Job

"Being a mayor is like walking on a moving belt while juggling. Right off you've got to walk pretty fast to stay even. After you've been in office a short time people start throwing wads of paper at you. So now you've got to walk, juggle, and duck too. Then the belt starts to move faster, and people start to throw wooden blocks at you. About the time you're running like mad, juggling, and ducking stones, someone sets one end of the belt on fire. Now if you can keep the things you are juggling in the air, stay on the belt, put out the fire, and not get seriously injured, you've found the secret to the job. You have managed to put it all together into something that works."

- the former mayor of Dallas as quoted in Kotter and Lawrence, 1976

"A common thing it is for the weaver to cover a coarse warpe with a fine woofe. The warpe being spon hard and small, and the woofe soft and round to cover the warpe from sight."

- J. May, 1613

The premise of this report is that individuals in executive roles can greatly help or hinder an organization's efforts to position itself effectively in the world. The report zeroes in on one such executive role, the general manager's job, that makes a big difference to the effectiveness of the organization for which the general manager is responsible.

In many organizations the position of general manager (GM) is the first point, looking up the hierarchy, at which the several functions of the organization come together. Although it is at the lowest level of the executive echelons, the position sits high in the organization and is potentially of great consequence. It may be the most important role below the CEO.

What does it take to be an effective general manager? To answer this question the report draws from a study my colleagues and I recently completed as well as from other recent research (e.g., Kotter, 1982a; Gabarro, 1985). The bulk of the material in this report comes from our study, with other research spliced in when appropriate.

In laying out what makes for general manager effectiveness, the report examines two aspects of the job. The first aspect consists of the requirements of the job that remain constant across situations. These are core attributes that one would find in the GM job wherever one came across it. The second aspect is the variation in the job and those factors that account for variation in the job across situations. Thus, based on our study, the first section offers generalizations about the general manager's job and the next section examines it in its particularistic glory in one corporation. Having established the basic requirements and the factors that give the job variation, the report moves to a third section that considers the process by which the job is actually defined and redefined, again taking examples from the corporation in which the study was done.

Constants in the General Manager's Job

Everyone knows that a general manager is in charge of a full range of functions in an organization; that he manages the managers in charge of those functions. Recent research, including long interviews we conducted with 11 general managers, gets us below this superficial definition to some of the underlying complexity. Following is a list of several critical requirements of the general manager's job, including: the need to function both strategically and tactically, to think multi-dimensionally, to build and make use of large networks of contacts, to manage organizations of large scope and scale, and to occupy an elevated position with its visibility and trappings. These constants are akin to the series of yarns, usually colorless, strung lengthwise in a loom--the starting-point for weaving fabric.

1. Operate strategically. For the last several years strategy has been the watchword of senior managers, only recently joined by vision. Strategy has to do with setting long-term direction, keeping one's eye on the big picture, doing the right things and not just doing things right (Bennis, 1982). It has to do with looking for openings and positioning one's organization to move through them. It has equally to do with "closings"--recognizing diminishing opportunities and taking steps to cut back or exit

altogether. It tends to have a flavor of innovation and new departures, rather than maintaining the status quo.

One of the general managers we interviewed was responsible for a business--one of many under his jurisdiction--that had gone from making $20 million in profit to losing money three years later, primarily because of Japanese competition and because quality "went to hell." Sentiment around the corporation was to get out of the business but this GM made a judgment that the business could be salvaged. That was the strategic decision. Next came the attempt to implement the strategy. First, he licked the quality problem. Then he went to a lot of trouble to persuade top management to file a dumping suit. One fellow GM resisted because the Japanese company in question was a customer of one of his divisions. The corporation won the suit, and a 35 percent duty was placed on the Japanese product. That duty allowed the corporation to raise its price without sacrificing marketability. The product generated $15 million in profit the following year.

Other examples of the strategic decisions that GMs make include: whether to take a product into a new market based on a new application; whether to market a product as the company's own brand or to market it through rebrander-distributors; whether or not to enter a consumer market when the company's strength is in industrial marketing; in which countries to create a local manufacturing presence; whether to build an R&D capability in a new business or to gain it through an acquisition.

Strategies sometimes get handed down to the GM--for example, a top management decision to play down commodity products in favor of high value-added, specialty products; or a decision to pursue an aggressive growth strategy based on a big R&D effort in a certain business. Sometimes the GM inherits a strategy--for example, to gain market share in a particular business. In these cases the GM's effort goes into implementation. Other times the GM develops the strategy, through a process of consulting subordinates and peers and selling superiors. This is especially true of GMs who preside over many different product lines, each one of which must be continually evaluated as a candidate for expansion, contraction or redirection. The challenge in developing strategy is assessing the future; projections are necessarily based on soft data. One GM, who described himself as the chief planner for his business units, said he relished the planning at this level--"developing all the scenarios, anticipating competitors' responses, reading the situation."

Implementation is a matter of making the strategic idea operational by finding vehicles for moving the business in the desired direction. GMs launch major projects. They also practice an admirable opportunism by taking advantage of impromptu daily events to push long-term agendas (Kotter, 1982a). One GM put it simply: "I define the direction and then translate it to others and keep the strategy going." He said he had daily interactions on strategic direction. Another listed several steps he takes to push a strategy, in this case that of becoming the absolute market leader in one area: "a) Ask yourself: is the strategy right?, b) maintain clarity of purpose and long-term orientation, c) spend time communicating, internally and externally, in the industry, d) fend off criticism (the strategy is a gamble), e) review progress at least quarterly, and specific tactical approaches twice a year, f) every year bring executive committee up to speed, reinforce their commitment." What is difficult about strategy, whether framing or implementing it, is that it is not a unidimensional goal or objective but a direction rooted in a complicated series of interrelated factors.

Other relevant data from our study comes from our interviews with the 11 general managers and with 14 other executives who worked closely with or had themselves been general managers. We asked each respondent to relate, from his experience, a brief example of an effective and an ineffective general manager. Our content analysis of the responses appears in Table 1. Of 21 people cited as effective general managers, six were seen as having what amounts to strategic ability. Of 16 cited as ineffective, four were seen as lacking this ability--as having a short-term focus or being a "crisis manager." Also relevant is the ability to convey strategy once it is framed, to excite people's imaginations. Five of the effective GMs were credited with communication skills; three of the ineffective ones were faulted for lacking these skills.

2. Operate tactically. Accompanying the need to take the long view and to manipulate basic parameters is the continual press for action (Kotter, 1982a; McCall & Kaplan, 1984). The vivid description by the ex-mayor of Dallas makes this point amply. The long days of general managers are filled with a procession, not always orderly, of items requiring their attention. Some of these items are fairly routine and require only the action orientation that any line manager brings to the job. Others are particularly thorny. Here is a sampling of the mid-range problems that, on a typical day, crossed the desks of the GMs we interviewed:

- getting rid of 75 rail cars that everyone dealing with a shutdown forgot about--a cash drain of $2.5 million

TABLE 1

Analysis of Short Descriptions of Effective GMs and Ineffective GMs

	Effective GMs (n=21)	Ineffective GMs (n=16)
1. Strategy	6 mentioned as having vision; thinking long-term; setting direction	4 mentioned as having short-term focus; being a crisis manager
2. Communication	5 mentioned as being a good communicator; communicating well with other groups	3 mentioned as being non-communicative and cloistered; having poor communication skills
3. Business Knowledge	6 mentioned as having a deep-rooted understanding of the business; understanding other functions; taking a broad view	3 mentioned as not being close to the business; not trying to understand the business
4. Learning	4 mentioned as being curious; not resisting change; being a quick study	none mentioned
5. Influence	10 mentioned (in positive vein) as getting support; knowing how to sell; getting people on board; motivating people 2 others mentioned (in negative vein) as kicking ass; being domineering	3 mentioned as being dictatorial; not assertive
6. Relationships	7 mentioned (in positive vein) as being good interpersonally; good listener; having good people skills	5 mentioned as having an inability to deal with people; not talking to people or interacting enough
7. Delegation	6 mentioned as being a good delegator	6 mentioned as being a poor delegator; too detail-oriented; dealing too often with inconsequential detail; nitpicking; being a doer, not a delegator
8. Priorities	4 mentioned as knowing where to spend time; able to prioritize	2 mentioned as unable to set priorities

	Effective GMs (n=21)	Ineffective GMs (n=16)
9. Integrity	5 mentioned as having integrity; trusted; being honest, credible; willing to take responsibility for self, admit mistakes	5 mentioned as not being trusted; overly political; lacking integrity
10. Confidence	6 mentioned as having a sense of personal security; communicating confidence; being decisive	6 mentioned as being insecure; having no guts, unwilling to make tough decisions; not willing to risk making enemies

- a problem with a competitor which is also a supplier
- news of an infringement on a patent for a major product
- phone calls from a customer wanting to buy one of the division's small businesses
- phone call from a supplier who wants to sell a piece of equity in his business
- a proposal the GM made to headquarters to install a system of incentive compensation in the division--corporation is resisting
- a $2 million claim against the company made by a customer in France--"We screwed them and now we have to negotiate."
- a meeting with a supplier about a new product of theirs
- a meeting to troubleshoot problems with a pilot plant for a new product
- a bid from a major customer (to buy large quantities of the company's product)
- a decision on a price increase and how to increase its chance of being accepted
- how to deal with a federal regulatory agency over a new kind of product
- how to export a new product that is still prohibited in the U.S.
- a meeting with U.K. representatives on incentives they will offer the company to build a plant there
- a personnel change in a key position
- a customer request for a price concession on a product that lost $16 million last year
- an investment opportunity outside the United States

These and many other items of lesser significance constitute the daily fare of general managers. One GM told us, "Every hour is filled with these kinds of issues."

Another said, "I am the focal point for day-to-day problems." Two things are apparent. First, the GM must be adept at taking action on tactical issues, alone or with the help of other people. Second, in the process of disposing of tactical issues, the effective GM keeps in mind the connection between these and overall strategy (Kotter, 1982a). This is much easier said than done, as attested to by one GM: "My days are taken up by the here-and-now. Dealing with future opportunities and problems is almost not part of life." But a GM whose strategy is product development via strong ties with customers will turn a complaint from a major customer into an opportunity to pick up a bit of intelligence on changes in its business. A GM concerned with keeping his finger on the pulse of a plant start-up in a new business will convert a chance encounter with the plant superintendent into a quick status report.

3. Think multi-dimensionally. Part of what is meant by multi-dimensional thinking, which comes into play equally at strategic and tactical levels, is the familiar analytical ability to break down problems into their constituent parts and to see the relations among the parts. Because problems come to the manager in bunches and action on any one problem often has implications for action on others, multi-dimensional thinking also involves seeing the ties among problems (Isenberg, 1984). These ties may take the form of tensions that must be resolved or complementarities that can be exploited. Managers who think this way also tease out the implications of pregnant bits of information such as the implied competitive threat in the piece of corporate intelligence that a competitor is planning to develop a new product that could cut into the market share of an existing product. Furthermore, multi-dimensional thinkers can make the leap from grand strategy to the day-to-day and back again. Executives with this capacity for cognitive complexity:

> tend to see multiple implications even in single items of information. They consider various potential impacts of that information on a variety of future events and decisions. They are often strategists par excellence. They tend to plan long into the future, taking into account all possible events that can be anticipated, as well as the consequences of those events. . . . Their flexible, sensitive and strategic style is the basis of a superiority [with complex problems] which we have so often observed in these managers. (Streufert, 1983, p. 15)

The GMs in our sample frequently referred to the trade-offs they make in juggling the several factors bearing on a

decision. They are well aware that decisions are not made in a vacuum; that if, for example, they decide to raise prices as a way of increasing profits, they may open the door to increased competition. One GM described the considerations that surrounded his decision on whether or not to create a manufacturing capability in Japan:

> I decided not to build manufacturing capacity in Japan. It is a low-price market with little chance to make money. Yet it is important to maintain a presence so we have credibility with Japanese contractors, our customers, who are doing business outside of Japan--credibility that we can handle big jobs. Because of their culture, Japanese companies don't change suppliers unless there are major problems. I made the decision not to expand manufacturing into Japan despite the fact our sales people wanted us to do it. The sales director in the North Pacific argued that it could help the relationship with contractors. He is probably right but I've got undercapacity elsewhere. We convinced the contractors to accept a mix of local and U.S.-made products. It's a balancing act.

GMs' plates are piled high with tangled issues like this one. (It is no wonder that some GMs come down with analysis paralysis.)

4. Use large networks. All managers have networks of contacts, ranging from close associates to mere acquaintances, upon whom they depend for the information, expertise and support they need to do their jobs (Kaplan, 1984). What makes networks challenging to develop and maintain is that they typically consist as much of people outside the manager's "vertical channel" as in it and therefore require the manager to find means other than formal authority to get what he needs (Sayles, 1979; Kaplan, 1984). What distinguishes the network of a general manager is its size and the facility needed to make use of it.

As Kotter (1982a) found in his intensive study of 15 general managers, they can have networks with literally hundreds of people up and down the line, including superiors and their superiors; subordinates and their subordinates; peers and their peers' superiors and subordinates; members of corporate staff groups such as central engineering, central research, the legal department, corporate finance and corporate personnel; and people outside the corporation including key people from among customers, suppliers, competitors, industrial or professional associations and relevant governmental bodies. In large organizations these people are usually geographically dispersed; in international

organizations they are dispersed worldwide. Many of these contacts are individuals of similarly high level in their own organizations. If the GM is lucky, he brings much of his network with him when he takes a job and develops those relationships that become important in the new job. One GM spoke of his "vast switchboard," much of which he had asembled in 20 years of varied assignments throughout the corporation.

General managers use their networks to gather the information that forms the basis of their strategies, to build support for those strategies, to maintain movement in a strategic direction, to keep their finger on the pulse, and to get help in hacking through thorny issues (Kotter, 1982a). In responding to others' comparable demands on them, GMs create a reciprocity that sustains their own supply lines. The good ones maintain their networks by making the experience of working with them productive and rewarding.

A key ingredient in a GM's ability to use his network is a "maze-brightness" that informs him as to who needs to be involved in what. A network is not a static thing. It is used and extended in highly dynamic fashion each time an issue arises. At his best a GM employs a "court vision" that enables him, like a basketball player breaking down court, to see the play developing and know how to position himself in relation to the players on his team and the opposing team (Halberstam, 1981). In technical terms the GM dips into his network by consciously or unconsciously consulting his list of stakeholders in an item that has just arisen. One can think of the GM as being party to countless sets of intergroup relationships, each one of which revolves around its own issue or set of issues, with all issues overlapping (Alderfer, 1984). The enduring issues invoke more or less stable arrays of people with a stake in the issue. The more novel the issue, the more care is needed in scanning for people who can help or who may stand in the way. One GM talked about the awareness he brings to managing upward in a major corporation:

> As a new GM you have to realize you no longer have one boss. You have a series of bosses who need to know things of importance to the business--the corporate controller, the people in planning, in engineering (who are building plants for you). I bypass C [his boss, the group vice president] and go to M [the executive vice president] for understanding, S [the vice president of administration], D [the head of corporate personnel], and M--I have to see each of them as a boss. They influence the business; they need to know. I can't afford

> politically or business-wise to let them get blind-sided about something affecting my business. I learned by offending some people, by making mistakes. I must sense whether there is a technical issue, a personnel issue in my business. If so, I must let the relevant person know. I call or meet or write a note; it depends on how important the issue is.

In addition to knowing who to involve, general managers need to know how to maneuver well at the point of involvement. This problem is compounded by the diverse collection of people the general manager has to work with. From the thumbnail sketches of effective and ineffective GMs (see Table 1), we found that those cited as effective were in many cases seen as having good influence skills (i.e., the ability to sell, get support, get work done through others) and good interpersonal skills. Interestingly, two of the GMs regarded as effective had poor interpersonal skills and influenced others by negative means such as fear and intimidation. In Kotter's study the better performing GMs used a larger set of influence tactics and did so with greater skill. "The excellent performers asked, cajoled, praised, rewarded, demanded, manipulated, and generally motivated others with great skill in face-to-face situations" (Kotter, 1982a, p. 75). Their arsenal also typically included references to sports and family as well as liberal doses of joking and humor. One of the most valuable means of influence at their disposal is the ability to express themselves well, to articulate ideas, to explain complex strategies clearly and compellingly. Summing up the qualities of a good networker, one GM said: "Effective people make it easy for other people to help them."

From our sketches of effective and ineffective GMs, we obtained two relevant findings (see Table 1). GMs cited as effective were in 10 of 21 cases seen as having influence skills--i.e., the ability to sell, get support, get work done through others. Those cited as ineffective were in 3 of 16 cases seen as not having good influence skills; one individual did well with superiors but at the expense of relationships with subordinates and peers. As to interpersonal skills, seven of the effective GMs were described as having them and five of the ineffective GMs as lacking them. Interestingly, two of the GMs regarded as effective had poor interpersonal skill and influenced others by negative means, especially fear and intimidation.

5. Encompass scope. The multi-functional scope together with the sheer bulk of the general manager's domain pose a stiff challenge. By definition the job requires the

incumbent to grasp, though not necessarily master, the full range of functions (marketing, sales, manufacturing, R&D, finance) and at the same time to transcend a functional perspective to achieve a holistic view of the business. The GM must do something for which few managers in companies and other organizations are adequately prepared--be a generalist. GMs must, as one said, "learn to orchestrate all disciplines to get business results." The thumbnail sketches provide a data point here: Six of the GMs classified as effective were seen as understanding the business as a whole, as taking a broad view; three of the ineffective ones were downgraded for not.

The GMs we talked to all stressed the importance of getting a solid grounding in the business. One commented: "Experience in the business is critical. You must know the customers. [He had a marketing background.] I don't think that just being a 'good manager' means that you will succeed in any business." Another GM, who transferred into an unfamiliar business, said: "It's hard to change jobs and enter a new business. You have to learn the business before you can effectively manage it." Consistent with what these managers said, Kotter (1982a) found that GMs on new assignments spent a minimum of six months learning the ropes. It is only then that they are in a strong position to take significant action (Gabarro, in press). The GM just quoted also said that the business keeps changing and he has to keep up with it. So the job of knowing the business thoroughly never ends because it constantly evolves, gradually or rapidly, in response to pushes from within or pulls from without. The GM must run to keep up with technical developments, changes in the economy, expansion into foreign countries, new products and new markets, internal organizational changes. In this connection, four of the GMs classed as effective were given high marks for being curious or a quick study or accepting of change. None of the ineffective GMs were mentioned in this regard.

Because GMs usually have a better command of some functional specialties than others, they must rely on people more expert than they. This makes it important for the GM to know who can be trusted and who cannot and also to be sufficiently literate in those specialties to tell good ideas and information from bad.

But with the breadth of the job goes the sheer magnitude. Talking about their schedules, GMs made comments like "no one can do it all" and "the routine could swallow anyone." The consensus among the GMs we interviewed seemed to be that the only way to survive was to dish out big chunks of responsibility to subordinates. Those who can't delegate

are doomed to fail. The consensus also seemed to be that in addition to achieving a "proficient superficiality" (Mintzberg, 1973) GMs need to pick a few key issues in which to invest themselves thoroughly. As one individual put it: "I spend a lot of time on four or five specific projects, especially those where the company can leverage its efforts. For these projects I keep 'hands on'." Delegation came up a number of times in the thumbnail sketches, with six effective GMs getting credit for delegating well and six ineffective ones cited for failing to delegate well and for getting bogged down in detail. A related characteristic of the effective GMs is that four of them were mentioned for setting priorities well.

Thus, as a complement to the distance they assume in relation to much of what happens in the business, GMs inform themselves thoroughly about and take an active decision-making role in a handful of strategically important issues. One GM focused on branching out into a business which several years ago had suffered an enormous defeat. He wanted $40 million to invest in the new business and knew that he would have to overcome top management's negative associations with it. Another GM in a growth-oriented end of the company put a lot of his energies into shepherding major new products to the marketplace. Still another spent a day a week for 14 months on a special assignment having nothing to do with the rest of his job. He headed a task force investigating the possibility of having the corporation generate some of its own energy.

GMs also tackle their large-scale operations by using structure. In conjunction with dealing directly with people, GMs resort to the indirect and impersonal method of shaping their organizations to influence things in the desired direction (Kotter, 1982a). A host of systems are available in most large organizations--management information systems, performance planning and appraisal systems, compensation systems, planning procedures, budgeting procedures, etc. To supplement these, the GM can introduce his own. To place a priority on product development, one GM split that function out from each of the business units reporting to him. Another mounted a quality-improvement campaign which involved staff in all functions and at all levels.

6. Handle the potentials and pitfalls of high position. The GM position sits in the upper reaches of a corporation and carries with it some demands, prerogatives and temptations not found in management jobs lower down. The watershed varies from one organization to the next, but beyond some cut-off point upper-level managers take on the characteristics of a corporate aristocracy. The 11 GMs in our sample

were among the top 75 people in a corporation with many thousands of employees. One GM described his passage into the upper echelon this way:

> When I joined a subsidiary company of ours in 1979, I was made a VP and became an officer. I had been a plant manager. It was obvious to me that in this organization the officer group had an exalted status. They could do no wrong. I found that people down in the organization just didn't feel comfortable to sit down and talk.

Another talked about the mixed effects of elevated standing on his relationships:

> I find there's less truly personal conversation. I try but my wife says I get into business modes. At this level people are less willing to sit and chat. The positive side is I get more attentiveness from superiors. I'm listened to more. I also get more respect from industry outsiders. And there is more expectation from subordinates regarding my competence.

Just as the organization confers a special status upon the individual, the individual may come to regard himself as a member of the power elite. The power and prestige of the position together with the history of success that got the GM there may conspire to foster an attitude of superiority and even of infallibility (Kaplan, Drath & Kofodimos, 1985). One of our GMs described another GM whom he saw as ineffective:

> He assumed a holier-than-thou attitude, an air of royalty. He was really strong on that "I'm the boss, don't question me." Matter of fact, if you questioned him twice, he'd tell you to go look for another job. Now when you have a slim margin of error on decisions in the first place and you say "just do it, I'm the boss" then you make a lot of mistakes.

It is clear then that managers at this level who let their success and standing go to their heads run a number of risks--of making misguided decisions, of damaging their networks, of becoming isolated from the rest of the organization, of stunting their continued growth as executives (Kaplan, Drath & Kofodimos, 1985). In its most innocent form this mentality grows out of a track record so successful that it blinds the individual to his or her limitations. The result may be the "I-can-do-anything syndrome": the individual harbors the illusion that he or she is capable of taking on any general-management assignment in any organizational situation, a perilous assumption (Kotter, 1982a). The

thumbnail sketches turned up a characteristic that pertains here. The characteristic is "integrity," which includes being honest and able to admit mistakes. Five of the GMs cited as effective were described as having integrity or its equivalent; five of the ineffective GMs were described as lacking it.

On the other hand, the incumbent may find the deference, trappings and expectations that go with high position uncomfortable and even onerous. He may prefer to be just himself rather than a symbolic figure, an organizational figurehead (Mintzberg, 1973). He may shy away from the limelight, the visibility, the speeches to large gatherings that come with the territory.

> The spot light is always on you. They are always trying to get at you, to influence you. I'm uncomfortable being the center of attention. I escape to the men's room.

The GM may discover with some dismay the press for consistency that accompanies the visibility (Janis & Mann, 1977); it becomes more difficult to change one's mind, to reverse oneself, when one has gone public with a policy or position. One of the general managers in our sample, while extremely effective in most respects, eschewed some of the ceremonial and status-conferring aspects of his role, and people spoke of him as "not being a typical executive."

If we assume that a general manager's skills are not infinitely generalizable, will not guarantee effectiveness in all general-management assignments, then by the same token how generalizable is the set of GM job requirements laid out above? The reason that GMs won't necessarily succeed in every setting is that they have come of age managerially in certain institutional settings, have adapted to those settings as well as to the GM job, and may or may not adapt successfully to the institution-specific requirements of a new setting. To the extent that the GM job is situation-specific, our set of job requirements is incomplete because it captures the central tendencies but not the variation. To say that to be effective GMs need to operate strategically and tactically, contend with big-scope and large-scale operations, build and use a wide-ranging set of coworkers and other contacts, think complexly about the intersection of business problems and social processes, and assume high position without letting it go to their heads is, one hopes, to say a lot. But it is not much different from saying that baseball players need to hit, field, run and throw. Knowing that a player could do all these things well enough to play major league ball wouldn't tell you which position to put him in. (Bill Drath suggested the baseball analogy that appears here and later on.) Likewise knowing

that a GM could meet the basic requirements of his job wouldn't tell you in which situations he would perform best. In what ways do GM jobs vary and what accounts for the variation? An answer to this question will help fill in the picture of what it takes for a GM to be effective.

Variants in the Job

Since all the GMs in our sample came from the same organization, it is convenient to inquire into variation in GM job requirements in that context. First, a few words about the corporation, which I will call Signet. It is a Fortune 500 company that generates some billions of dollars in annual sales and employs tens of thousands of people in numerous locations in the U.S. and around the world. Signet grew up around a core set of businesses and has since diversified, to a large extent by acquisition.

Looking at the GM job at Signet, as we did, we noticed immediately how much the job varied. The factors that accounted for much of this variance are: the type of business, formal lines of authority, the GM's superior, the GM's interpretation of the requirements, and time. These factors did not affect whether the basic requirements of the GM job apply but how they applied. The variants in the job are analogous to the woof, which is the set of threads woven across the warp to give the fabric color, texture, and composition.

Type of business. At Signet it makes a great deal of difference to the GM's job what piece of the business the job is located in. Mintzberg (1973) also determined that type of industry affected the make-up of senior management jobs. Divisions within the core business are big and broad, each containing many different businesses, markets and products. One of the major other divisions is equally big but narrow, with just a few businesses and products and an essentially homogeneous market. Most of the rest of the divisions are comparatively small and narrow. Obviously, the bigger and more diverse the division, the more difficult it would be to become knowledgeable about it and frame a coherent strategy around all of it or separate strategies around the disparate pieces. Mintzberg (1973) also found that organizational size had an effect on senior management jobs.

The divisions which the GMs headed up also fall at various points in the organizational life cycle, from growth-oriented to mature to declining. Those GMs in our sample who are rapidly building new businesses on the basis of a heavy

emphasis on R&D have very different jobs from those who are perched atop businesses whose markets are shrinking and are being "cashed out" or phased out. For example, the GM who was trying to start a business from scratch on the strength of a heavy emphasis on R&D had a strong background in R&D himself, something that GMs in charge of mature businesses lacked.

It also matters whether the business is a chunk out of the corporation's core business and therefore closely related to the processes and products of its sister businesses or, on the other hand, self-contained in a business sense and perhaps also geographically. GMs in the self-contained units tended to be more autonomous and isolated, and their networks were less extensive.

The profound influence that the type of business can have is evident in the experience of one GM who ran a self-contained high-growth business unit. He told us that he had adopted and encouraged in the organization "an informal style" that his kind of business necessitated.

> We're in a kind of business that if you don't do it that way, I don't think we'd ever get there. We have a business that's made up of many, many pieces, no one of which will make you or break you but collectively they will. Very different from this one group over here that, hell, has only three big customers. One customer buys 50% of the output. Well, in this case we probably have 150-200 customers. It's not like we're selling retail but the largest customer only buys 8% of the output. On the production side, we make products that are essentially tailor-made for every customer. Our, let's say, 200 customers each have 15 different sets of specifications. And they're all different. Each of these has a little different manufacturing process, a little different set of problems associated with it. So from a marketing point of view, you've got to keep all those balls in the air all the time because no one of them will break you but it's having most of them handled correctly that makes everything work. And from a manufacturing standpoint we've got five plants. They are working on probably 300-400 products going through our system at any given moment. In product development we have so many things in the pipeline that each one has its own project manager, who coordinates the new product between research, engineering and marketing.

> You try to keep your finger on a lot of balls at one time and to do that you've got to talk to a lot of people and try to keep it short. I have five people who report to me and I don't necessarily work all those questions through the appropriate chain of command. I go directly to the guy who's handling it.
>
> So this is a business of lots of bits and pieces, a business that requires a lot of coordination. If you don't have an informal way to handle those, you can't get there. You never get all these messages back and forth if they have to go through the department heads. So what we have is a system that says that if somebody in technology wants to talk to somebody in marketing, don't run it through the chain of command. We're trying to respond to what the customer wants, and our customers move fast. So we've got a matrix organization that just won't stop.

This GM apparently prospers in the fluid structure, the freedom that he and other managers have to go to whomever the task requires, the extremely fast pace, the complex formal and informal structure set up to ride herd on the plethora of products and customers. To cultivate this kind of organic, participative internal structure (characteristic of complex, fast-paced organizations), and to participate in it, to engage in this kind of freewheeling networking, to stay informed as the product mix proliferates and to keep up with the intense pace would hardly be every GM's metier. This GM job is, in this respect, fundamentally different from one in a slower moving business such as those found among the core Signet businesses, where the GM could expect to operate more hierarchically and to structure a more traditional organization. The markedly different context gives a different shape to the same basic set of requirements.

Lines of authority. Besides type of business, the preceding example contains another factor that has sizeable impact on GM job requirements--a division's organizational structure and, in particular, the formal lines of authority it bestows upon the GM. Five of the GMs are embedded in a matrix that puts functional managers in sales, manufacturing and R&D on a par with them. Although they remain the focal point and are at least informally awarded "an extra half stripe," they have a different relationship with the functional managers who in a traditional organization would be their subordinates. Frustration, although not universal, runs high. The GMs in this situation talk about the need to "buy manufacturing, technology and selling services." They

also have to compete for these services with the other GMs in their operating company. On top of this matrix, even though Signet assigns worldwide accountability to GMs, it has an international organization that is not under the GM. Thus most GMs "have worldwide accountability without the authority." Their people outside of the United States report up the ladder of the International Division and have a dotted line to their GMs. Overall, the GMs in matrix arrangements complain about the time and trouble they must take to "gain the commitment of peers to implement programs, to see things as you do, to stick to agreements we have made." Another organizational variation is the hybrid case of two GMs who have marketing and R&D reporting to them but not sales and manufacturing. To whatever extent the GM must operate in a matrix, it puts a premium on a different set of networking skills, the kind necessary for lateral relationships where formal authority is not available (Kaplan, 1984). As one GM put it: "You have to make Signet work for you, not through administrative authority but through logic and persuasion, coercion, stealing and any other way I can get it." In contrast, the joy of running an organization without a matrix was captured in one GM's statement: "I don't have to check with five guys to go to the bathroom." Note that GMs also need to use logic and persuasion with subordinates.

The superior. An important determinant of what is required of the GM, which is nowhere stated formally, is the GM's boss. When our project team presented the results of our study to the GMs, the report did not mention the boss as a factor in how the GM job varies. Two groups independently corrected our mistake. The point they made was simply that the priorities of the GM's superior strongly influenced the GM's priorities. As a result, the GM will be more or less concerned with generating profit or investing in future growth, with following the chain of command or taking an egalitarian approach. Depending on the latitude given by the group vice-president, the GM will have more or less influence over strategy-making and the handling of critical mid-range problems that spring up. Students of role sets have found the same thing, that the expectations for how a role should be performed are conveyed chiefly by a small set of people, prominent among whom is the person's superior (Kahn et al., 1964).

The incumbent. No less important a determinant is the GM himself. The GM intentionally or automatically decides what to require of himself. In defining the role, he is of course influenced by the situation in which he finds himself, which is why GMs form their agendas as they enter their roles (Kotter, 1982a). But in responding to the numerous things that could attract his attention and energies, he chooses to

work on some and not others. Why? One basis for choosing emerges clearly from the research: functional background (Gabarro, 1985). General managers with strong backgrounds in marketing identify a need to build or revamp the marketing function. The finance types pay particular attention to the numbers. The former international manager reorganizes his area into a domestic and international organization (Gabarro, 1985).

They see what they are attuned to see; they instinctively play to their strengths. The same job occupied by different individuals would result in different definitions of the job requirements and different execution, as Stewart et al. (1980) found in her study of district managers in England's National Health Service. What is clear is that there is no such thing as a general manager's job independent of the incumbent. We must think of the phenomenon as the "person-in-job." In almost artistic fashion the GM shapes the job requirements out of a rich interaction between the givens in the situation and the givens within himself. As a GM remarked to us: "Every GM is individualistic. For new GMs, it's a problem because there are no rule books. You have to build your own nest." One GM, taking the corporation's interest in shifting from commodity products to specialty products and drawing on his own strong technical background and penchant for making change, adopted a strategy of developing new high value-added products through an innovative program of collaborative research with leading customers. This strategy departed dramatically from that of his predecessor, which illustrates the difference that the incumbent can make in setting the specific requirements of the job.

This list of factors that produce variation in the GM job by no means exhausts the possibilities. With the passage of time, for example, the content of the job changes because of the dynamic nature of what happens within the GM's domain (a major acquisition one year, a long and bitter strike the following year, and the distorting effects of a strong dollar the next) and because of the dynamic nature of the larger corporation (which may be diversifying one year and divesting a few years later). The list is exhaustive enough, however, to make the point: the variation in what is required of GMs is sufficient to rival the elements in common. As one respondent said, "It is probably not possible to see the GM's job as having any consistency across different companies" (although in saying this he allowed for consistency among the GM jobs within a company). The variations, however, do not cancel out the similarities. For example, the difference is not <u>whether</u> a GM networks but <u>how</u> the GM networks. Similarly, <u>all GMs</u> have to operate strategically, but one may be

plunked into an unformed situation that requires him to evolve a strategy and another may enter a situation in which the strategy is formed and his job is chiefly to execute it by keeping it front and center in the organization.

The question of GM effectiveness is further complicated if we expand the scope of the discussion beyond discrete criteria to an overall evaluation of the individual. GMs can be assessed on how well they match up against each of the several requirements of their jobs, but what about a global measure of effectiveness? Is there a threshold of overall effectiveness past which a GM, despite any rough spots or shortfalls in specific areas, would be declared effective? No GM has it all. Capable GMs come in all kinds of shapes and sizes, and no single individual's package of capabilities fits the contours of the situation perfectly. How flawed would a GM's performance have to be on one dimension for him to be considered ineffective overall? The importance of this question is brought home by the case given to us as an example of a remarkably effective GM. This person was nominated by two other people as well:

> He took over the X business when it wasn't much of a business. Y product was an interesting opportunity but no one knew how to make money with it. In five years he single-handedly evolved a strategy for [commercializing and marketing] Y, brought it into commercial development and made it into a big money-maker. He saw the opportunity, evolved the vision [for the business] and put it in place in a short period of time. He delegated the day-to-day running of the larger business to a subordinate and did nothing but focus on Y.
>
> He was an irascible bastard, pompous, bright, domineering, a synthesizer, a bulldog. There were two ways to do things, his way and the wrong way.

Another person held a similarly high opinion of this GM's entrepreneurial ability but put his failings more graphically:

> His flaw was his kick-in-the-ass approach. . . . Fear is why he and the division succeeded--fear, fear. Fear is a powerful motivator. . . . People were afraid of him and his impact on their careers. He would shower verbal abuse on people--in public. His version of a performance review was to go out to dinner and after two drinks he'd go around the table and tell each person what was rotten about them. Not a bed of roses. There were people who wanted him dead.

This case may be extreme, but it raises interesting pragmatic and moral issues. Does the end justify the means? This flaw has proven fatal to some executives' careers; abrasiveness was one of the leading causes for "derailment" in a recent study of executives (McCall & Lombardo, 1983). We can only assume that in this case the general manager's successes were stunning enough to offset his blatant failing. Evidently top management pegged him in a point beyond their cut-off for overall effectiveness. How would we researchers have approached the evaluation of this man's performance? Does effective mean to us that a general manager will score high on all major performance criteria for the job?

In baseball good hitting is more important than good fielding so that a superb hitter who can't field well can make it in the major leagues. Catchers are important so that a good catcher can be a miserable hitter and still have a career in the majors. On the other hand, any player other than a pitcher who hits less than .225 or so will not stand a chance. All major league players have the ability to hit, field, run and throw but many of them possess these abilities in unequal proportions. What are the minimums and how are those affected by maximums? What redeeming qualities can offset poor performance against another criterion? How do our theories of effectiveness take account of these imbalances in baseball players, general managers and organizations in general? How well do our theories address configurations of strengths and weaknesses?

How the Job is Defined

The picture of the general manager's job as it stands is incomplete because the job is represented as an essentially static thing, a fixed entity. As we have understood it so far, a given job is a product of the constants built into all GM jobs and the variation growing out of the particular circumstances surrounding it. As such, a given job simply is. But how does it become what it is and, having become that, how does it evolve into something new? So having seen the warp and woof of the GM job, we turn now to the process by which the fabric of the job is woven. In so doing we should reveal a dynamism that makes the static elements more real.

Implicit in the discussion at the end of the last section is the fact that an underlying set of values defines what about an individual GM's performance is valuable to the system and what is dispensable. The GM job, embedded as it is in the system, is shaped by system values and reshaped as the values change. To see how system values are at the root

of the GM job, we will look at how a shift in overall strategy at Signet produced flux in the job.

A system's core identity determines what is most important to it. For every system there are certain "critical contingencies," classes of activities upon which the success of the system is contingent (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977). These critical contingencies are arranged in a hierarchy, with the vital function on top (Kanter, 1977). In a consumer products company like Procter & Gamble, for example, marketing and advertising are pre-eminent. When Digital Equipment Corporation concentrated on selling sophisticated mini-computers in an industrial market, its engineerng function predominated. The hierarchy of functions in an organization is reshuffled as the organization evolves and its priorities change.

Like many other large, established U.S. corporations, Signet wanted to renew itself by emphasizing innovation, by fanning its entrepreneurial spirit (Peters & Waterman, 1982). To do this, Signet decided to put its technical base to work in developing commercially successful new products. In this light GM effectiveness did not mean any old GM effectiveness but effectiveness in the service of an entrepreneurial, development-oriented company. This redefined purpose put a premium on the technical function and on its being represented at high levels. As one executive said: "To be a technologically driven company, you need people with technical backgrounds calling the shots." (The strategic change at Signet affected some business groups more than others. Those already pursuing a growth strategy predicated on R&D were not affected; they tended to be led by GMs with technical backgrounds. In fact, these units served as a model for the rest of the corporation.)

The strategic redirection came at a time when recent retirements had drained top management of most of its technically strong representatives. The problem was compounded by the fact that there were very few technically oriented candidates for general management positions in the pipeline. The management succession plan revealed that only a small minority of the candidates for general manager had technical backgrounds and that the same was true of the pool of candidates for business director, a position one notch below GM.

In this way the GM job at Signet was revised to include a larger technical component. Deciding to revise the job and implementing that decision, however, were two different things. This is where dynamism in how the GM job is defined and redefined enters the picture.

Implementation via selection. Basic to implementing an altered notion of the GM job is finding individuals to fill it. The rub at Signet is that, to oversimplify, there were roughly two types of people in the organization to draw from--those from the technical community and those from the business community. From a vice-president we interviewed, we got capsule descriptions of the typical technical person and the typical business person.

Qualities of the typical business person that make for a good GM:

Proactive
Aggressive
Good interpersonally
Real world
Results-oriented
Ambitious, impatient for success
Short-term
Sells self and products (from a sales background)
Orchestra leader (learned by matrixing to sell products)
Knows strategy

Qualities of the typical technical person that don't make for a good GM:

Reactive
Abdicates responsibility [for influencing business decisions]
Passive
No interest in strategy
Science more important than next promotion
All the time in the lab
Works on a project for 1-3 years
Fear of failure, professional pride: can't kill projects
No risk taking

Positive aspects of technical people:

Technically proficient
Long-term perspective

It is important to know that the vice-president came from the business side. The view from the technical side did not coincide at every point with his. The technical managers we interviewed tended to see the GMs as action-oriented to a fault, losing sight of the long term, and as "presentation types," sometimes more concerned with style than substance. One of the bones of contention between the technical and business communities was the operational definition of a

"strong technical background." Influential technical people felt that it took a minimum of 10 years in the technical function to qualify. Commercial people disagreed. The split between the two camps boiled down to this: the technical side claimed that business types, including GMs, were hopelessly short-term, and the commercial side faulted the technical types for being hopelessly long-term.

The question as to which type was best suited for the GM job was hung up in a tension between recent history and the call to the future. Top management had in the recent past generally emphasized short-term income generation more than long-term development. As the strategic redirection was being engineered, general managers at Signet felt pinched by a double message coming from top management--invest in the future and produce attractive short-term results.

The vice-president quoted above recognized on the one hand that, with their technical proficiency and long-term perspective, technical people "could help Signet find high-technology niches for the future, a corporate priority." On the other hand, he believed that technical types would not generally work out as GMs because although top management claimed it wanted technical leaders it "rewards proactive commercial types and short-term results."

The definition of the GM job and who is best qualified for it was thus caught up in this tugging between the two communities and the two sets of values at Signet. The struggle had something of a political character in that the relative standing of functions at Signet hung in the balance. When we entered the scene, the business community more or less held sway, as evidenced by the fact that it made up the large majority of top management. Because of this, the commercial wing held an advantage in the debate over the GM job. The tide was shifting, however, as evidenced by the new emphasis on technically based growth. Commercial people were sensitive to the change. One executive told us: "If I leave Signet it will be because I am prevented from the top jobs because of my lack of technical background."

Implementation via development. This controversy over selection of the best candidate assumed two distinctly different types of manager at Signet. If we consider the possibility that a new cross-bred type of manager could be developed, then we come to a second form of dynamism in the implementation of a revised job definition. One option was to develop a new breed of GM out of people with technical backgrounds. As one high-level person put it: "What is needed is a program of Technological Affirmative Action." It was clear to everyone we spoke with that to prepare for the

GM job, technical managers would need breadth of experience, which they could get by taking assignments with commercial responsibilities. Our interviews quickly made it apparent, however, that formidable barriers blocked the passage of technical managers to the commercial side. The business side rejected the typical technical manager as ill-equipped, for reasons given earlier. On the technical side, relatively few managers wanted to go over to the other side; their mixed feelings about being managers in the first place and their stereotypes of business managers hurt their motivation. The situation was aggravated by the assumption that it takes a minimum of 10 years to become strong technically, by which time the individual has missed the chance to ascend the ladder to GM.

Moving technical people to the commercial side wasn't the only way to develop technically proficient senior managers. Theoretically, you could start with non-technical people and give them training and experience on the technical side. Three of the GMs we interviewed freely admitted that their lack of technical expertise hampered their performance. One said: "I'd be better off with more technical knowledge." A second said:

> I am asked to decide on research programs that will determine the success of this business 5 years from now. But I gotta go on blind faith. I've picked up some technical background along the way. But ideally I'd have as much overall technical ability as commercial ability.

So there was an awareness of the value of technical preparation. Unfortunately, barriers comparable to the ones slowing down traffic in the other direction stood in the way of migration of non-technical managers to the technical side. If anything, these barriers were higher. The general feeling was that technology was a "closed shop." Technologists "believe that you must have a technical background to manage technology." Apparently the demands were so stringent among scientists that "if you spend more than two years out of research you lose your technical credibility."

Thus both the structure of the GM job and the career structures to prepare people for that job were swept up in a less than optimal intergroup relationship. However unproductive for Signet, the situation illustrates nicely the messy social and political process by which a new definition of the GM job at Signet was hashed out and put into effect. The social order in organizations and elsewhere is a negotiated one (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Because of Signet's corporate commitment to a technology-driven future, the technical ability of its GMs became an

issue, one that could only be resolved through extended dialogue among the interested parties. Such resolutions are never permanent because the next stage in Signet's future will raise a fresh set of issues about the mix of requirements of the GM job.

Restating the problem. Signet, then, conjured up a vision of its general managers--and higher-level management--of the future. The new generation of executives "would need to walk both sides of the street." "We want hybrids, and we can get them with early identification and cross-training." The hitch was that a program predicated on cross-grooming would run afoul of the relatively impermeable boundary separating the technical and commercial communities throughout much of Signet. Once Signet began to make cross-functional transfers, the culture would presumably loosen up. But what could be done to make the organization more receptive to transfers in the meantime?

Some people called for an all-out attack on the problem of relations among all functions, not just between technical and commercial. Their label for what they felt afflicted Signet was "functionalitis." This is a condition borne of the practice of having managers grow up primarily in one function. As a result, they are inclined to know only their own function well and to defer too quickly to the expertise of colleagues in other functions. They are also prone to expect their counterparts to defer, in turn, to their expertise. All of which breeds an unhealthy territoriality, a compartmentalization. The prescription of choice was the obvious one--to "encourage coordination, instead of islands." Some said that to put teeth into this encouragement, top management would have to get fully behind the program. When it came to transfers, for example, top management would have to be prepared to sacrifice some continuity in technical specialization in favor of functional cross-breeding.

We were led to the cultural issue as a way of clearing the way for a program of career development. But it occurred to us that perhaps we had the tail wagging the dog. If our concern was GM effectiveness, and if that depends on pulling the disparate functions together, then the culture is hardly just a vehicle for building in breadth as potential GMs climb the ladder. It is the milieu in which GMs operate, and it will powerfully limit their ability to operate effectively, especially with respect to joining a business's production/selling capability with its product development capability.

To emphasize development, Signet needed to shake off its compartmentalizing tendencies and begin practicing an "integrative management" that built strong ties between all

the parties to the process of identifying, developing, producing, marketing and selling commercially viable new products (Kanter, 1983).

To come up with the kind of GM needed for a redirected Signet, what is required is not only the indicated career-tracking but a corporate management culture that makes cross-training possible and, more than that, provides a milieu conducive to the GM's carrying out of the corporate mission. The revised definition of the GM job at Signet is a cog in the revised management structure at Signet. The two entities have a symbiotic relationship. The job, via its occupants, serves as a regulatory mechanism in the management structure--a vital steering function. The job, however, will not perform its function, especially the coordination of R&D and the business side, unless the larger structure unites these two sides of the house. Nor will potential GMs get the cross-training they need unless the two sides are sufficiently integrated to allow managers to transfer over. Thus the fabric of the GM job takes its place in a larger tapestry.

Conclusion

Instead of summarizing the content of the GM's job, I will extract several guidelines for approaching an understanding of the job.

1. Generalizations about the job are fine, are useful up to a point, as long as we recognize that "particularizations" are no less important. Theories must be stated in accordance with local conditions (Dunbar, 1983) and in relation to time and place (Spence, 1985) and specific contexts (Sternberg, 1985). The dilemma is that the more abstract we make a theory of the job in order for it to encompass the wide range of instances of it, the further the theory retreats from accurately representing any concrete instance. Conversely, to the extent that a theory does justice to a concrete instance, it gives up generality. The inescapable conclusion is that generalizations about the job must be modified to fit local conditions. These conditions include: type of "business," type of organization, stage in organizational life cycle, and so on.

Whatever common elements can be discerned in the GM job, the variation among concrete instances will always rival the central tendencies. Theories of GM effectiveness need to leave in the variance instead of stripping it away in an effort to find the lowest common denominator.

What we have in the GM job or in any social phenomenon is what philosophers call the problem of the one and the many. The phenomenon contains within it both a oneness that unites all instances and a plurality that encompasses differences among instances. The GM job is a single thing and a multitude of things.

2. Because of the variation in contexts, GMs cannot necessarily transfer successfully from one context to another (Kotter, 1982a; McCall & Kaplan, 1984). The more similar the situations, the easier it is to make the jump. If the situations are vastly different (e.g., different industry, different organization), then the GM who would make the grade must be blessed with an ability to form new relationships easily and a knack for learning new things quickly. Kotter (1982b) found that GMs are specialized; they have adapted to specific contexts and are therefore not necessarily well suited for different contexts. In fact, Kotter pointed out that the fit between GM and context can erode if the context changes--something that happened at Signet when the call came for technical competence in GMs. Similarly intelligence (defined as the ability to adapt to or shape an environment or select suitable settings within it), which is a considerable part of what GMs bring to their jobs, is not the same thing across environments (Sternberg, 1985, p. 46).

3. The GM job needs to be studied in the context of its dynamic relation to the larger system of which it is a part. GM requirements flow from system requirements (you must always ask: effective at doing what?), which in turn can only be met if GM requirements are also met. As we saw, GM requirements grow out of a negotiated definitional process, one that cranks up every time the system changes its own requirements. The lesson: deal in the complexity around the job's membership in a larger, interactively causal set of relationships.

As important as any job, executive or otherwise, might be, it is important not to fixate on that job. At Signet the GM job looked at first as if it were focal, but later revealed itself to be no more than a key piece of the larger management structure, with which it has a symbiotic relationship.

4. No GM job exists apart from its incumbent. No matter what requirements issue forth from the context and are mediated by the GM's superior and other influential individuals, the incumbent inevitably shapes the job in his or her own image. The only way to think of any given GM job is as the person-in-job. The job's requirements and the way it is enacted are a function of the interaction between person and situation.

5. Whatever our criteria of GM effectiveness, very few concrete instances will meet all criteria, will conform completely to any model of ideal GM behavior. Actual instances of anything are uneven, lopsided, marvelously ragged around certain edges. I don't subscribe to the view that executives-to-be visit a cafeteria of executive virtues where they get to pick one of each. I will go so far as to suggest that our field brings a misplaced idealism to setting standards for effectiveness--an idealism that, expressed in mechanisms like performance appraisal, could threaten to homogenize people. Is it possible that we project our ego ideal onto the people and organizations we study? High standards are one thing; perfectionism, another.

As Belbin (1981) said, nobody's perfect but a team can be. Human imperfection notwithstanding, sytems can be robust if they compensate for one person's flaws with the corresponding strengths of others. A GM in our sample had no previous experience in a business but succeeded because, among other things, he was sandwiched by people who knew the business. I suspect that the field would benefit from putting more energy into understanding configurations of strengths and weaknesses in individual GMs as well as constellations of executives who together constitute an organization's top leadership.

The GM job is a critical job in large organizations, but one that has not received research attention commensurate with its importance. Historically the behavioral sciences have been working their way up the organizational ladder. The field began by studying workers, moved on to foremen and supervisors, and progressed to middle managers. There is still little known about CEOs and what they actually do. But we are beginning to accumulate knowledge about general managers, who occupy the first rung on the executive ladder (Kotter, 1982b; Gabarro, 1985). The study reported here was an effort to collect raw material on this job. As we fill in our understanding about what it is really like, we will be in a position to select, develop and facilitate the effectiveness of GMs.

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